

# Slusher: Get 'wonky' to help shape your quality of life

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One of the worst criticisms you can lay on a news story -- or commentary, for that matter -- is to call it wonky.

A "wonk" is a generally pejorative term used to describe someone who is exceedingly interested in some specialized topic, usually having to do with public policy or some issue facing government. The term's origins aren't entirely clear, though I like the theories that it could be either an inverse of the word know or the descendant of an acronym for the phrase "WithOut Normal Knowledge."

However it worked its way into the lexicon, the word is all but a synonym for boring. Think of that person who regales a dinner party with the ideal asphalt content of the base layer of a highway surface or the one who traces the history of committee votes on legislation governing windmill maintenance. The topic may be important, but "scintillating" rarely describes conversation about it at the local coffee shop.

Making it so is our job. Our reporters and editors meet with a lot of wonks. Some of us, truth be told, are wonks of various types ourselves. Some of us may even be something akin to wonk groupies. We like hanging around people who are really smart on some topic, hoping some of the smartness might rub off. And sometimes, the wonks need our help -- not just ours in the media, but ours as in all of ours, we citizens who could be affected by the policies they promote or the products they create.

To which purpose I now introduce you to CMAP. Cryptic acronyms are common among wonk organizations. This one stands for [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), and if you already are finding your eyelids growing heavy and a dull throb pounding in your ears, hang on a minute. Here's why you should care: The work of the wonks at CMAP already have played a major role in the quality of life in our community and will continue to for decades to come. And you can play a role in it.

Funded by federal and state grants, the quasi-governmental agency works at macro and micro levels to envision all sorts of planning projects throughout Cook, Lake, DuPage, Kane, Will, McHenry and Kendall counties. The ideas it produces and the work it does with local community planners, as well as state leaders, helps determine local priorities for everything from local parks to major highways.

They've played integral roles in such local projects as the widening of the Jane Addams Tollway, routing of trucks around O'Hare, various economic development issues and technical assistance on nearly 200 community projects throughout the region.

One of these wonks' current undertakings is development of plans to help shape life in the Chicago region for the next 30-plus years. Here's where you come in. They're holding monthly town hall-style forums to collect ideas on how local residents envision the shaping of their communities.

The meetings, which began in April, are built around specific themes following from what the planners call "alternative futures." An April meeting in Chicago looked at how climate change could affect communities. A May 4 meeting in Chicago emphasized the importance of making neighborhoods "walkable." Remaining sessions will look at transportation on June 22 in Chicago, economic opportunity on July 19 in Homewood and use of resources on Aug. 15 at the Libertyville Civic Center -- which, in fact, will be hosted by our columnist Kerry Lester.

You can [find out more about how to get involved](#) in what the agency calls its "ON TO 2050" project (building on the "GO TO 2040" framework governing its current efforts) at <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/onto2050/forums>. Yes, I know it may sound wonky. But it's important to remember that today's wonky idea is tomorrow's superhighway or

downtown development district. If you want more than just to adapt to whatever the planners of your future come up with, if you want to actually help influence the plans, you should think about attending one of the forums.

And, hey, who knows? Maybe it'll give you something to talk about at your next dinner party.

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